



Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is an organizational learning and change process first described by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastava in 1987. Appreciative Inquiry, or AI, identifies what's working rather than focusing on problems. It is a process of collaborative inquiry, based on interviews and affirmative questioning, that collects and celebrates "good news" stories of a community or organization - the strengths, passions and life-giving moments found within every system. These stories serve to enhance cultural identity and opportunities for inspired, positive change.

AI is a tool for Gracious Space because it mobilizes the natural curiosity in individuals and gives a safe place to "risk" telling stories about what's working in the organization. It is an attitude of compassionate curiosity that uncovers what is good about an idea or situation. Usually these stories are told privately, in gossip, at coffee breaks, or at informal gatherings. AI recognizes the public value of these stories for building trust and being appreciative of what's working well. Sharing this type of information in this manner creates a trusting, positive foundation upon which to learn and change.

Many traditional approaches to managing organizations and planning change focus on defining problems, setting targets, planning strategies, and overcoming obstacles. While such approaches have their value, they have unfortunate side effects as well.

- People spend their time focusing on what is not working. The result is often reduced morale and resignation to a problem-filled environment.
- Since data collection focuses on failure, failure amplified can lead over time to an air of dis-empowerment and inferiority. In such a situation, people avoid risk-taking.
- Addressing problems creates a culture of problem-centered improvement. The only time people pay attention to learning is when they've failed. This makes the development of a culture of continuous improvement and learning difficult.

While appreciative inquiry does not ignore problems, it recognizes them as a statement and desire for something better, then works to identify and enhance what that something better is. Briefly, two principles apply to use appreciative inquiry: **find out what's working** and **amplify by fanning**.

The difference between the two approaches are outlined in this table:

Traditional Approaches

Define Problems
Fix what's broken
Focus on decay

Appreciative Process

Find existing solutions (what works)
Amplify what works
Focus on life-giving forces



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HOW TO USE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Appreciative inquiry can be as simple as having a conversation where you allow yourself to be curious. It can be used by anyone at anytime without the need for special data collection efforts or strategic change processes.

Apply the two principles: **find out what's working** and **amplify through fanning**.

Appreciative Inquiry is just what it implies. In the normal course of your activities, ask people to tell you their stories of what is working, and respond with interest and enthusiasm. As you practice AI, you'll find yourself supporting and legitimizing what is working well.

The enthusiasm around what's working well is contagious. As you engage in appreciative inquiry, encourage people to expand their thinking and connect the specifics to how the whole community or organization could benefit from their experience. Pay attention to what excites others and follow your own lines of interest. As the process gains momentum, spirit rises and action feels easy.

From here, you can make decisions about what practices, systems and behaviors to continue (amplify) and what practices, systems and behaviors to add or change. Interest in others' ideas increases collaboration. Information is shared and trust builds.

- Assume health, vitality and genius in people
- Collect essential details of specific examples
- Connect to the teller through empathy by following the flow and listening actively
- Follow what you're attracted by, what evokes a response in you
- Support and learn about what excites the other person
- Encourage the interviewee to expand, to connect beyond the specifics to how the whole community could benefit from this.

Questions that are appreciative in nature are:

- What's working that you'd like to tell me about?
- Who is it working for? Why do you think it's working well?
- What's happening when you are happiest at your work?
- What's good about this idea? Why is it important to you?

Cooperrider, David and S. Srivastava. "Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life." Research in Organizational Change and Development, Vol. 1. Eds. R. W. Woodman and W.A. Rasmore. Greenwich: JAI Press, 1987. 129-169.